

HABS No. IA-167

J. H. Green and Company Building
(Rivola Theatre)
202 High Ave. West
Oskaloosa
Mahaska County
Iowa

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

J. H. GREEN AND COMPANY BUILDING
(Rivola Theatre)

HABS No. IA-167

Location: 202 High Ave. West, Oskaloosa, Mahaska County, Iowa.

Present Owner: Mildred Wenrick

Present Use: Movie Theater; to be demolished Fall 1984

Significance: The Rivola Theatre is a significant example of an early movie house. The building possesses architectural merit, exemplified by the bracketed tin cornice, tripartite arched windows, pedimented side windows, and use of ornamental quoins.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The J. H. Green and Company Building was converted into a movie theater in 1920 with its grand opening on April 21, 1921. Prior to that time this building had numerous owners and uses. The building was erected in summer 1874 by John H. Green and George J. Terrell to house their store, J. H. Green and Company, which sold agricultural implements. The December 3, 1874, Oskaloosa Herald stated that J. H. Green and Company had the largest stock and occupied the nicest quarters of any agricultural implements business in central Iowa.¹ The stock of agricultural implements included wagons, pumps, seeds, plows, harrows, seeders and planters.

J. H. Green and Company was founded by John Green in the 1860s. Green was born in Harrison County, Ohio, in 1832, and moved to Minnesota in 1856. He came to Iowa and located in Mahaska County in 1864. He engaged in the agricultural implements business in 1866.

J. H. Green was active in the civic as well as commercial interests of Oskaloosa. In 1874 and 1875 Green served as councilman for the 4th Ward in Oskaloosa. Also in 1874 he was the secretary for a joint stock company called the Mahaska County Agricultural Society. This society was interested in encouraging farmers in their work, bringing them in contact with their neighbors, and giving the farmers an opportunity to display the fruits of their industry.

J. H. Green and Company's first location in Oskaloosa was on the southeast corner of the public square. In 1873 their building was destroyed by fire and the business was moved to a new location north of the northwest corner of the public square.

¹Oskaloosa Herald, December 3, 1874, p. 2.

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The agricultural implements business prospered in Oskaloosa as the city became the center of a very fertile agricultural county. Farmers came from miles around to obtain supplies in Oskaloosa. Because of the excellent supplies provided by J. H. Green and Company, business flourished and more space was needed for its agricultural warehouse. In April 1874, the company broke ground for its new warehouse at 202 High Ave. West. When completed, the new warehouse was a two-story building with a rectangular floor plan, 40' x 120' with masonry load-bearing walls on a limestone foundation. The surviving bracketed cornice has widely spaced unornamented square brackets. The front facade consisted of a windowed storefront, projecting porch and six narrow symmetrically placed windows on the second story. The east wall of the building had six windows on the second story, and eight windows and three doors on the first story. Most of the original windows and doors have segmental-arched windows.

In 1885 George J. Terrell retired and sold his one-half interest to Peter L. Thomas; the business was then known as Green and Thomas. The J. H. Green and Company Building remained a house for agricultural implements from 1895 until 1907, but had several names. From 1898 until 1901 the name of the business was Chase and Marshall Company, changing to Lewis Brothers and Miller around 1902 and to Lewis Brothers in 1904.

In 1907 the J. H. Green and Company Building became an office and depot for the Oskaloosa Traction and Light Company, which operated the Oskaloosa and Buxton Electric Railway Company. The standard-gauge electric operation replaced the narrow-gauge horsecar system in Oskaloosa in 1898. Cars left the depot at High Avenue and A Street on a 20-minute headway from 6:20 a.m. until 10:40 p.m. on weekdays, and from 8:20 a.m. until 10:40 p. m. on Sundays.² The Oskaloosa Traction and Light Company also sold household gas and electric appliances from the same building.

Between 1915 and 1919, the J. H. Green and Company Building changed hands again and became the Walton Auto Company. The Walton Auto Company used the building's first floor as a showroom, selling Overland Cars and Plowman Tractors.

In 1920 George T. Cruzen, from Oskaloosa, began creating a grand movie theater in Oskaloosa. He investigated what was available and found the 202 High Ave. building. In April 1920 Cruzen received estimates for the necessary changes and improvements. Inspired by some of the great theaters in France, George Cruzen wanted to "make it a real house." Oskaloosa citizens contributed funds for the theater construction. Stock was subscribed in 1921 and the Rivola Playhouse Corporation was incorporated.³

²Iowa Trolleys, Bulletin 114 (Chicago: Central Electric Railfans' Association, 1975), 172.

³"How the Rivola Happened to Be," Oskaloosa Herald, April 23, 1921, p. 2.

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Between summer 1920 and the theater's opening in April 1921, the J. H. Green and Company Building was converted into the Rivola Theatre. Architects Vorse, Kraetsch and Kraetsch from Des Moines directed the remodeling. Ornamental plasterwork with extended detail was designed and constructed by specialist George E. Heidenrich from Dayton, Ohio. Heidenrich claimed the Rivola Theatre as his "masterpiece."⁴ Other ornamentation included Tiffany work on the walls done by imported artists using decorative tile which was intended for a million-dollar Des Moines playhouse that was never built.⁵ The cost of the improvements when completed was in excess of \$100,000.

The grand opening of the Rivola Theatre was on Tuesday night, April 21, 1921, at 7:00 p.m. The finishing touches on the theater had been done that afternoon when the final draperies were installed. The opening was a magnificent and successful event beginning with a comedy special followed by a dance number and finally a movie. The opening night movie was "The Passion Flower" featuring Norma Talmadge. Other events of the opening night included the opening overture played on the new orchestral organ and the presence of Iowa's popular movie star, Juanita Thomas.⁶ Outstanding films continued to be shown at the Rivola Theatre on afternoons and evenings, including Sundays.

The entire front facade had been altered for the new theater. According to the architects' drawings (see HABS photos IA-167-9 through -22), the main (north) entrance to the theater had three sets of double doors with four fluted columns with Corinthian capitals set between the doors. There was also a single entrance on the east side of the building. Above the main entrance and the side entrance, there was a projecting rectangular canopy adorned with rosettes and round lights which flashed. Above the lights there was relief ornamentation. The second floor was altered so that there were three contiguous arched windows with ornate keystones and Corinthian fluted pilasters. These arched windows originally had leaded opalescent sash windows. On either side of the central arched windows were two smaller, classical pedimented windows. On the corners of the front facade and at the termination of the brickwork on the east wall, decorative stucco quoins were added (HABS photo IA-167-2). All of the windows on the east wall were removed and filled in with brick. A new brick face was added to the front facade and at the bottom 6' of the east facade. Cement plaster was added to the exterior of the remainder of the building. The original cornice was retained.

In converting the building into a theater, extensive changes were also made to the interior. The plan on the first floor consists of the main

⁴Oskaloosa Daily Herald, April 9, 1921, advertisement.

⁵"Rivola," Oskaloosa, Iowa, Folder, Box 28, Federal Writers' Project, Special Collections, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa.

⁶"Grand Opening of the New Rivola," Oskaloosa Herald, April 22, 1921, p.

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entrance at the north end which led to the lobby, with the theater office on the west end of the lobby. The lobby was followed by a central box office with double doors on either side leading to the second lobby area or foyer which had a tile floor. On either side of the foyer were stairs which led to the balcony. At the south end of the foyer was the entrance into the auditorium. The auditorium floor sloped downward toward the stage, located at the south end of the building where the movie screen was mounted. The proscenium was ornately decorated with a cornice and plaster enrichments. On either side were ornately decorated arched exit doors. Above the exit doors were wood grills flanked by ornate plasterwork and Corinthian columns (HABS photo IA-167-6). In front of the stage was an orchestra pit, which was later covered. In the basement there were three dressing rooms, women's and men's bathrooms, an orchestra room, and a property room. In the early days the stage was used for live performances, which usually took place prior to the showing of the movie. On the second floor or mezzanine, there were restrooms for the patrons. Originally, the women's restroom was on the east side and the men's restroom was on the west side with a large lounge area with a wood floor in the center. To the south of the area was the entrance to the theater balcony which sloped down towards the stage (HABS photos IA-167-8). Lateral steel I-beams had been added to support the freespan balcony. At the rear of the balcony was the projection room.

A series of alterations to the theater have taken place over the years, beginning in the late 1920s when the snack bar was added. In the 1930s the original marquee was altered and the original ornamentation and lights were removed and replaced with lighted advertisement panels on each face. Above the panels were neon signs stating the name of the theater, "Rivola," adorned with a curvaceous Baroque-like neon design. A vertical sign which read "Rivola--First Run Movies" was also added that projected from the second story. The marquee on the east facade was removed. In 1938 square enamel panels were added to the lower front facade and partially on the east side of the building, covering the original east entrance. The pipe organ was removed, and the original air-conditioning system was replaced.

In the early 1940s the marquee was replaced with the current marquee, which is modernistic with an Art Deco flavor, typical of the period in which it was installed. In 1954 a new large cinemascope screen was installed which covered most of the stage; live performances were no longer given. The basement dressing rooms and the orchestra pit were no longer used.

In 1955, the Rivola Theater was purchased by Mildred and Everett Wenrick, who renovated and modernized the theater in the late 1950s and again in the late 1960s. Aluminum and glass doors replaced the original entry doors. The ornate freestanding box office that divided the lobby area was removed, and several other interior changes were made, including the removal of the original stair bannister. The lobby and foyer were joined to form one lobby, which was modernized with new wall paneling, a new ticket counter, and a refreshment counter. Acoustical celotex was placed on the auditorium ceiling and the mezzanine area was altered with the lounge area being replaced

with an office.

Some interior features of note are still present in the theater, particularly the remaining plasterwork in the auditorium that runs along the walls and ceiling and along the balcony edge. The plasterwork is a leaf and flower pattern. There are rosettes with light bulbs in the center on the ceiling in front of the stage area and at the rear of the balcony (HABS photos IA-167-4 and -5). There are tall gold-painted ornamented rectangles on the walls that emphasize the height of the ceiling with decorative brackets in between (HABS photo IA-167-3). The balcony is no longer used, but it has some of the same ornamentation on the walls, with brass light fixtures.

ORIGINAL AND SUBSEQUENT OWNERS

Reference is to deeds in the County Auditor's Office, Mahaska County Courthouse, Oskaloosa, Iowa.

- 1885 Deed, August 11, 1885, Volume A-1: 84.
George J. Terrell and wife to Peter L. Thomas, undivided one-half interest.
- 1895 Deed, February 19, 1895, Volume A-1: 84.
John H. Green to Mary Thomas.
- 1906 Quit Claim Deed, November 19, 1906, Volume A-2: 75.
E. C. and George Kent to Mary Thomas.
- 1907 Quit Claim Deed, January 4, 1907, Volume A-2: 75.
Walter Thomas and wife, M. Kenworthy and wife, Esther Thomas, to Mary Thomas.
- 1907 Deed, February 12, 1907, Volume A-2: 75.
Mary Thomas to Alma Clark and Helen Henderson.
- 1920 Deed, June 11, 1920, Volume A-2: 75.
Alma Clark and husband, Helen Henderson and husband, to Rivola Play Houses.
- 1955 Deed, March 15, 1955, Volume A-3: 75.
Rivola Play Houses to Everett G. Wenrick and Mildred Wenrick.
- 1958 Deed, July 22, 1958, Volume A-3: 75.
E. G. and Mildred Wenrick to Mildred Wenrick.
- 1983 Deed, February 24, 1983, Volume A-4: 75.
Mildred and Everett Wenrick to Glen and Ruth Stanley.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Primary and unpublished sources:

Mahaska County Transfer Books, Auditor's Office, Mahaska County Courthouse, Oskaloosa, Iowa.

Mahaska County Death Records, County Clerk's Office, Mahaska County Courthouse, Oskaloosa, Iowa.

Architectural Drawings, Rivola Theatre, Vorse, Kraetsch & Kraetsch, architects, Des Moines, Iowa.

"Rivola," Oskaloosa, Iowa, Folder, Box 28, Federal Writer's Project, Special Collections, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa.

B. Secondary and published sources:

"Grand Opening of the New Rivola." Oskaloosa Herald, April 22, 1921.

The History of Mahaska County, Iowa. Des Moines: Union Historical Company, 1878.

"How the Rivola Happened to Be." Oskaloosa Herald, April 23, 1921.

Iowa Trolleys, Bulletin 114. Chicago: Central Electric Railfans' Association, 1975.

Oskaloosa Herald and Oskaloosa Daily Herald. Various articles from years between 1864 and 1960.

"Oskaloosa vs. the United States." Fortune, April 1938.

Polk's Oskaloosa City Directories. 1876-77, 1887, 1898-99, 1900-01, 1904-05, 1907-08, 1910-11, 1914-15, 1919-20, 1921-22.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Plans call for demolition of the Rivola Theatre in fall 1984. This historical documentation was completed by the Urban Programming Corporation during May, June and July of 1984. It is one portion of the historical/architectural recordation of seven city blocks in downtown Oskaloosa prepared for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). For more information, see HABS No. IA-147.

This documentation was completed under the direction of Gregory D. Kendrick, Historian for the National Park Service, Rocky Mountain Regional Office. Project supervisor was Peter Sortino of the Urban Programming

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Office. Project supervisor was Peter Sortino of the Urban Programming Corporation. Historical documentation was completed by Diane Bowman of the Urban Programming Corporation. Photographer for the project was David W. Preston of St. Louis, Missouri.